

WESTMINSTER VILLAGE: A THEME-BASED APPROACH TO TEACHING SENIORS ABOUT THE INTERNET

by Juliet Kerico



In the fall of 2004, the Indiana State University Library's Reference Department decided to venture out into territory normally reserved for public libraries. We began an instructional outreach program called Bits 'n Bytes to teach basic computer and Internet searching skills to a selection of seniors within our community. What makes this program so special is that it has served as a point of outreach to a community of patrons often forgotten by academic libraries. With the educational initiatives of our university in mind, which encourage community outreach and engagement with the community, we developed this program and tailored it specifically to seniors in our area. Currently, the Bits 'n Bytes program at Westminster Village Retirement Community in Terre Haute serves as an example of how academic libraries can, and should, remain connected to the educational needs of the seniors in their communities.

The rationale for initiating this program was two-fold. The first goal, stated above, was to align the library's initiatives and activities with those of Indiana State University (ISU) generally. Although our patrons are defined primarily as students, faculty, and staff of the university, part of our mission as a state-supported institution is to provide library resources and services to the citizens within the surrounding communities. Our engagement with the latter serves as a consistent reminder of the link that exists between maintaining positive contact with the community and the future success of our university. Bits n' Bytes is one of many university programs that has helped unite town and gown, and in doing so, has shown the importance of building partnerships that benefit the community as a whole.

Our second reason for developing this program was based on our observation of the regularity with which our local seniors access the library to use the Internet and our library's rapidly expanding menu of electronic resources. As is the case with other Indiana state-supported libraries, the reference department at ISU is in the position of providing a significant amount of reference assistance and individualized instructional

services to a growing community of university alumni and retirees. In addition, we also serve a large population of unaffiliated local seniors. Because seniors figure commonly in the reference department's everyday service activities, our creation and involvement with the Bits n' Bytes program has helped enhance our ability to serve this diverse population of users.

For a number of years prior to the implementation of the Bits n' Bytes program, the reference department had some experience formally educating seniors about library resources and computer searching methods by serving as instructors for courses featured in the university's Dewey Institute for Lifelong Learning, a selection of fee-based, noncredit courses open to the public and offered each spring at ISU. Unfortunately, these classes tend to be somewhat abbreviated and are offered only once a year. Building on that existing model, Bits 'n Bytes enables us to expand our instructional efforts as an ongoing year-long initiative, thereby increasing our experience with seniors as a user group.

PHASE I: SITE SELECTION

In the summer of 2004, the ISU Library began investigating local retirement communities as possible



Westminster Village

sites for an ongoing computer instruction program for seniors. Recognizing that our current staff resources would make it impossible to implement a multi-level program at multiple locations within our community, we decided to focus our efforts on one location. After considering various sites within the city of Terre Haute, we contacted and began consulting with Jan Cockrell, the Activities Director at Westminster Village Retirement Community. Westminster Village is a private, non-profit facility populated by approximately 150 residents, ages 55 and up. The facility offers both assisted and independent living apartments and provides a health care and rehabilitation center onsite for residents.

We selected Westminster Village because it is one of the larger retirement communities in the area. Furthermore, after reviewing their monthly activities calendar, it was clear that the facility does an excellent job of building a sense of community for its residents—a fact we hoped would encourage greater participation in the computer courses we were designing. Another aspect of Westminster Village that makes it a desirable location is that many ISU alumni and faculty retirees are residents at Westminster Village. We were encouraged to find that, through this program, we could continue extending services to individuals affiliated with the university.

PHASE II: LAB SET-UP

After touring the facility, we were impressed by some of the common area features at Westminster Village, which among other things included a large-screen media room with data projector and a small computer lab. We agreed that the computer lab, which only contained three older model PCs, would need to be expanded and upgraded to accommodate more students. Our library systems department was able to assist in updating the lab with some computers that had recently been replaced within the library. We installed eight Gateway 1400 PCs and two desk jet printers. The PCs, which are all hardwired to the Internet via DSL, run on the Windows XP Pro operating system. Additionally, we could connect to the Internet in the media room via a wireless hub installed for the purpose of expanding the range of instructional methods.

With the lab assembled, we began working on the content and method of instruction. Internet connectivity in both the media room and the lab enabled us to consider a two-fold method of instruction. We developed a program that focuses first on demonstrating various navigational features of computers and the Internet and then hands-on practice of those skills.

PHASE III: COURSE DEVELOPMENT, DESIGN, CONTENT

Based on our prior instructional experiences with seniors via the ISU reference desk and the Dewey

Institutes classes, we found it was important to develop a program that would not intimidate the participants. Our consultations with the Westminster Village Activities Director revealed that many of the residents were reticent to learn about computers both out of a general fear, as well as some ignorance regarding the various uses of this technology. Nightly news stories about computer viruses and identity theft had left some to consider computers and the Internet a risk they were unwilling to take. These barriers needed to be addressed early in the program. Once we successfully debunked some of the popular myths and exaggerations about computers and the Internet, we were in a better position to communicate a sense of the usefulness of computers.

We designed the format of each class around the idea that a demonstration and discussion of the material might be a good way of easing inexperienced students into the world of computing. Each class is an hour long, beginning with a 15-minute PowerPoint presentation and live demonstration in the media room. These presentations are then followed by 45 minutes of hands-on training through guided activities in the lab. This format provides the opportunity to develop trusting relationships with the students, giving them a forum in which to openly discuss their perceptions and areas of confusion before attempting to navigate the computer themselves. When polled, the participants have continued to reinforce their preference for this format despite missing out on 15 minutes of hands-on work at the beginning of each class.

In addition to helping build community among participants, utilizing the media room each week for a PowerPoint presentation also provides a simple means of producing instructional handouts that students can consult when practicing lessons on their own time. For this purpose we distributed a three ring binder to each student at the beginning of the 13-week session. The general mode of instructional design is to create slides that feature a screen capture of the website or software we are demonstrating. To these images we add arrows and text boxes explaining the navigational methods used to advance to the next step in the process. Providing a visual resource tool such as this is extremely useful for students who choose to practice the lessons on their own. For the purpose of accommodating any sight impairments, each presentation is printed out for the students as one slide per page, and the font size is always at least 20 pt, Arial.

Along with distributing the PowerPoint handout, we also include a handout featuring at least one structured activity for the lab portion of each class. The presentation and corresponding activity work well together to introduce and then reinforce a computer skill and/or corresponding Internet resource. Once in

the lab, the instructors lead students through the sample activities, which is a key part of ensuring that they have understood the content of the presentation that preceded it. During this portion of each class, students are all encouraged to work at the same pace. Participants who are more adept at navigating through the activities will serve as mentors by assisting partners or peers at neighboring computers if they are having trouble getting to the next point in the instructions. This method of peer instruction is a useful way to acknowledge skill improvement in students over time, and is well-received with students in this particular age group.

Using the semester as the guiding time period, we developed a 13-week syllabus of classes that meet once a week. Every lesson of each week typically focuses on a different topic, with the first four classes devoted to introductory topics such as computer basics, opening an email account, and word processing. Many of the classes, thereafter, focus more narrowly on specific Internet sites or methods of finding information on the Internet. These theme-based classes are quite popular. The structure of the syllabus, which emphasizes themes rather than skills, attracts interest in the classes, encouraging participation from seniors possessing a more sophisticated understanding of computers.

Website-based classes range in topic from "Electronic Greeting Cards" to "Genealogy on the Web" to "Reliable Sources of Health Information Online," all of which may have immediate application to the lives of the students. In addition to attracting computer novices, these thematic courses also demystify computers and pique the interest of skeptical seniors who might not otherwise participate in the program. Although many of the students are new to computers, structuring the course around themes is an effective method for attracting seniors who consider themselves to be too skilled for an "Introduction to Computers" class.

PHASE IV: TEACHING AND LESSONS LEARNED

While designing the classes was a relatively simple theoretical process, teaching them proved to be quite a challenge. All classes, which have ranged in attendance from 4 to 15, are team-taught by a reference librarian and a support staff teaching assistant. Some of the more advanced students need little direction and can be relied upon to assist less skilled neighbors during the lab portion of the class. However, many classes have been filled entirely with individuals who have little or no computer training and who may suffer from various physical limitations. For this reason, it became clear that it is essential to have more than one instructor assisting with the lessons, particularly if the class size is greater than five students.

Hearing impairment, hand motor skills, and learning retention are some of the biggest obstacles our

students face in learning to navigate computers. Because of these somewhat uncontrollable factors, our expectations about pacing and skill retention needed to be modified to better correspond with the abilities of the students. We approach both the lectures and lab activities with these issues in mind by speaking loudly and clearly and stopping often for questions. Another useful approach we utilize is to frequently ask questions of the students, encouraging them to share their thoughts regarding concepts they find confusing, or methods that are helpful in overcoming those issues. This method of querying students at the beginning of each class gives us the opportunity to review and reintroduce concepts that were discussed in prior classes—an approach that proves to be effective for increasing learning retention.

In addition to accommodating some of the physical limitations to learning, we also recognized the need to clearly communicate concepts that are largely foreign to this particular user group. In preparing the PowerPoint presentations and accompanying lab activities, we use and maintain consistent vocabulary to describe computing elements and navigational activities. For example, we quickly learned that instructing students to "click on the link" or "double click on the Internet Explorer icon" needs to be clarified by stating "*left-click*" and "double *left-click*." In addition, once we decided to use certain terms to describe an activity, we tried to avoid deviating from that vocabulary. We found it helpful to the students to distribute a glossary of computer terms that they could refer to while learning the jargon most novice and advanced computer users take for granted as clearly understandable.

PHASE V: REFINING METHODS

The process of developing and delivering this program over the past two years has led to many changes in the way that we design the classes. We learned that, with seniors, it is far more important to deliver instruction clearly than it is to cover a large amount of content. Many topics that we originally designated for a single session class, such as emailing and using Microsoft Word, are now spread out over two or more class sessions. This slower, more thorough approach both increases skill retention and limits frustration among the students. We also determined that utilizing repetition as a method of instruction leads to greater retention and success of the students. For instance, regardless of the theme, we begin each Internet searching class in the same way: students are instructed to open up Internet Explorer and to use Google to conduct a search. This process enables students to better understand the difference between a browser and a search engine, while also reinforcing terminology. As a result, we have noticed a marked improvement in the students' comprehension of these concepts as the 13-week sessions advance.

Our experiences with the Bits n' Bytes program has also shown us how important it is to invite student involvement in course design when delivering instruction to seniors. All of the participants have had a lifetime of experience that is valuable and deserves recognition. We actively recognized this by seeking advice and input from the class participants about what they would specifically like to learn to do next with computers. Encouraging this type of participatory course design has helped us develop an ongoing relationship of trust and engagement with the seniors in this program.

It is clear that for the purposes of ensuring that senior students gain and retain computer skills, the most effective instructional plan might best be delivered by offering multiple classes aimed at varying skill levels. When the resources are available to accommodate this type of program, the results are likely to be quite powerful. Due to staffing limitations, the Indiana State University library attempted to create a meaningful computer learning experience for the residents of Westminster Village with a minimal degree of staffing resources. The level of involvement and positive feedback we have received from the students engaged in this program has shown that a creative, participatory approach to teaching can and will facilitate learning and community building for seniors in an assisted living environment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In addition to serving as the Assistant Head of Reference at Indiana State University's Cunningham Memorial Library, Juliet Kerico is also the liaison to the departments of English and Theater and is the Browsing Coordinator. She holds an MA in English from Case Western Reserve University and an MLS from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. Ms. Kerico is a field bibliographer for the Modern Language Association's International Bibliography as well as a member of the Association's Bibliography Advisory Council. In addition to her service for the MLA, she is also an active member of ACRL and is currently co-chairing the Literatures in English Section's New Members Discussion Group. Her research interests include library outreach, bibliography, library instruction, and popular culture.



Sample 13-Week Session

Westminster Syllabus Spring 2005

Session 1: 1/12/05

Computer Basics

Session 2: 1/19/05

Email Basics

Session 3: 1/26/05

Digital Cameras: Emailing, Saving, and Printing Photos

Session 4: 2/2/05

Composing Documents in Microsoft Word

Session 5: 2/9/05

More About Microsoft Word

Session 6: 2/16/05

Electronic Greeting Cards

Session 7: 2/23/05

Search Engines

Session 8: 3/2/05

Genealogy on the Web

Session 9: 3/9/05

Online Shopping and Security Risks

Session 10: 3/16/05

Travel Information Online

Session 11: 3/23/05

Online News, Sports, and Movie Reviews

Session 12: 3/30/05

Online Community Information

Session 13: 4/6/05

Reliable Sources for Health Information Useful Websites for Seniors